

137. IMMIGRANT THEOLOGY:  
*"Theology in Context"*

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SOURCE: Enrique Armijo, an excerpt from "Towards a Definition of Theology in Context," in "Un Nuevo Pueblo: An Ethnography of a Hispanic Protestant Community of Faith," Master of Arts thesis, University of North Carolina, 2000, 26–31.

## Towards a Definition of Theology in Context

Unlike liberation theology, which is partly informed by Latin American militancy in the face of political and economic colonialism, the defining act of immigration theology is the movement itself — a profound, shared suffering felt on the intimate level, that leads the individual to leave her home country to seek out a better life. Rather than relying on Scripture as justification for revolution and reversing the structure of the existing social order, as the liberationists propose, parishioners at Iglesia Unida experience the convergences between Scripture and liturgy thematically, where Bible stories, songs and sermons relate in dialogue with the experience of being an immigrant, of suffering and struggle, and of faith as a guide in the newly refashioned life. The Biblical precedent promises eventual deliverance and success for those who keep themselves open to God's word, presence, and influence in the time of adjustment.

Interpreting theology in light of immigration requires that we consider Scripture — including the Exodus, the Sermon on the Mount, and references to land the Israelites left behind — from a culturally specific frame of interpretation. But rather than interpreting Iglesia Unida Protestantism as culture, therefore minimizing its transcendent elements, we should interpret the culture of the church, and all that occurs in it, as religious.<sup>1</sup> The ties between present experience and sentiments and the universal themes in Scripture and liturgy allow Iglesia Unida culture to be considered as religious and as contextual, and establishes culture as that which shapes the dialectic frame between the congregants' lives and God's influence.

While the feeling in theology can and should never be totally dissected from the act for the sake of analysis, it is important to consider theology's expressive modes and nature in order to better understand its function. As theologian and anthropologist David Maldonado reminds us, theology is, after all, human activity, and although its themes reflect a relationship with a spiritual world, its practice originates within human experience; consequently, it takes the shape of those who develop and practice it, "in concrete localities and situations."<sup>2</sup> Theology, Maldonado says, reflects

1. For an interpretation of the particularities of ethnic culture as religious, see Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

2. David Maldonado Jr., "Doing Theology and the Anthropological Questions," *Teología en Conjunto*, ed. José David Rodríguez and Loida I. Martell-Otero (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 98–112.

the particulars of those engaged in doing theology, an articulation of Christian faith as practiced and experienced in individuals or groups in human contexts.<sup>3</sup>

This conception of theology requires an acknowledgement of the social facet of religious experience, where the key relationship not only rests between the individual and God, but also involves a group articulation of community concerns, needs, beliefs, and relations. The parishioners' contexts are the realities within which "faith is known and religious life is experienced." Such theology speaks to the conditions under which its practitioners live, and offers them rules and relief in dealing with the hardships relevant to that particular life.

As Pastor Maria Teresa implies in Chapter 1, a church without articulated faith is "a recreational center with a supportive counselor." To propose that the theology practiced at Iglesia Unida is context-specific to experiences of immigration felt both by the individual and by the community, we first have to establish theology as speaking on two complementary levels: 1) to the individual's relation to the world in which she lives, as Maldonado articulates above; and 2) to the community's relation to God and each other.

These two levels are in constant and consistent relation, enacting a functional dialectic between what Peter Beyer, in an essay considering globalization's effects on religion, terms the central religious dichotomy: immanence/transcendence. Beyer writes:

The immanent is the whole world, the whole of perceptible reality, all meaning communicable among human beings. . . . The transcendent, as the polar opposite, serves to give the immanent whole its meaningful context. In this sense, it acts as the condition for the possibility of the immanent. The central religious paradox lies in the fact that the transcendent can only be communicated in immanent terms, and this by definition: communication on the basis of meaning is always immanent, even when the subject of the communication is transcendent. . . . [Religious communication and symbols] always point radically beyond themselves. [They deal] simultaneously with the immanent and the transcendent.<sup>4</sup>

Beyer considers this relationship between this world and another a "paradox" which lends meaning to human communication, a functional

3. Ibid.

4. Peter Beyer, *Religion and Globalization* (London: Sage Publications, 1994), 5.

system by which religious communities negotiate "the root indeterminability of all meaningful human communication, and which offers ways of overcoming or at least managing this indeterminability and its consequences."<sup>5</sup> This methodology follows in a long line of a pathological interpretation of religion, where the worldly and the spiritual are surgically separated, or placed in opposition to each other, in order to better understand religious function. But if we accept faith as the primary part of this social dialectic, consider religious communication as inherently immanent yet in perpetual dialogue with the transcendent, and localize the transcendent as not beyond the reach of the immanent, but expressed within it, we can consider theology not just as serving social functions (such as establishing community, addressing core problems in human life, and confirming elemental moral rules of human conduct), but also as a mode of offering access to communication with a transcendent ever-present. Church members at Iglesia Unida see proof of the transcendental in the everyday: in the way that prayers have helped them find employment or complete a dissertation; in the way God may help a family member successfully cross the river into the United States; in the way they feel the blessings of the service. The theology of church service is a channel through which believers can communicate with God and bring their individual beliefs into a shared social setting, reporting on those transcendent experiences with those who have felt, or seek, those same touches of grace. Social piety exists in this context-specific theology, but not apart from the transcendent nature and expressive relation with the spirit that is at the heart of worship at Iglesia Unida and in all religion. In interpreting the theology of a community in such transition, I've tried to resist the urge to relegate faith as only a mode through which community is shared, but rather consider it as the foundation upon which community is being built.

Theology *is* in part social practice, but that practice is grounded both in culturally specific social contexts and in relation to a real, transcendent world, with the proof of the latter's existence as certain as the former, expressed and made real in communal language. There may be context specific frames of interpretation in the theological language at Iglesia Unida, but that language articulates themes and issues that speak to spiritual concerns as well as to worldly ones. When the *Pastora* or a parishioner makes reference to movement and displacement in the Bible and its relevance to the immigrant experience (such as one guest preacher's declaration that "like Abraham, we leave our families to come to unfamiliar places"), he

5. Ibid.

quickly brings the presence of God into the frame (with "but like Abraham, we leave with the faith that God will be with us. Because he has promised that he will be with us").<sup>6</sup>

To consider the way that expressed theology takes the shape of the communities in which it is enacted, it may be worthwhile to think of theology as an articulated language, as Maldonado says, informed by the particularities of the communities in which it occurs. If context is the painting, then language is the paint — the latter the channel through which the former communicates, the tool that makes meaning of what is being communicated. Language shapes theology the same way it shapes context, and language maximizes its effect in particular contexts by taking their shape. It is also perfectly able to articulate issues and concerns that lie beyond that context, while still working within those context-specific systems. By considering the processual nature of the language of worship — not just the Spanish language, in our case, but the liturgical language, the language of fellowship, the language of support and participation — then we can consider theology from a context-specific perspective without divorcing it from or setting it in paradox to its transcendent nature. These systems of language simultaneously shape and take on the shape of context, emergently creating and following rules of context-specific communication. And theology at its most effective, to repeat, operates within these rules, while at the same time maintaining an open channel of dialogue with the transcendent in order to fulfill its own immanent needs and transcendent destinies. A Bible translated into Spanish, for example, speaks of the same episodes of and testimonies to faith as a Bible in English or, for that matter, in the original Greek. Meaning and interpretation, however, are determined in large measure contextually. The immanent world and the transcendent one, like language and context, are in constant dialogue; one informs understanding of the other.

### *Immigration as Sustaining Narrative and Bases for Common Understanding*

In emergent immigrant communities, where so many members of the population foreground memories of recent arrivals in their personal histories, immigration stories become, like language, a common characteristic. Immigration creates a new folklore, one of escape and readjustment, and, in the case of immigration theology, eventual renewal. These are the experiences that most recently arrived Latinos have in common. Among

6. Hector Velasco, Sermon, Iglesia Unida de Cristo, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, July 6, 1999.

the many functions this immigrant folklore serves is the creation of an archive of common experiences from which immigrant theology can draw. These context-specific texts represent what Jose Limón, in the context of Mexican-American Southern Texas, calls "sustaining narratives" — a shared sense of lived experiences that deepen the common identities of both immigrant and parishioner.<sup>7</sup>

Despite labels like "Latino" or "Hispanic," which may imply a homogeneity within the immigrant community, it is important to keep the diverse nature of United States Hispanicity near the front of our interpretive frame. The services at Iglesia Unida maintain the continuity of the shared experience across many different nationalities, backgrounds, and professions: Mexican, Colombian, Peruvian, Anglo, African-American, Indigenous, European; dishwasher, doctoral student, consultant, housekeeper. Building the theology around the shared experience of immigration allows it to speak to many of the parishioner's current contexts, teaching the manner in which to negotiate this period of cultural transition, and using the morals of Scripture and the epiphany of Pentecost as proof of the eventual deliverance for the community who follows the Christian path. The theology therefore references the themes in the sustaining narratives of the parishioners, and reinforces the shared nature of those themes through participation and performance.

7. José Limón, *Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 112.